



# Refugees and Migrants in Bloemfontein, South Africa During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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## COVID-19 in Bloemfontein

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As a migrant, I am closely connected with refugees and other foreigners in Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (MMM), especially the city of Bloemfontein, one of the largest economic urban centers in South Africa. As I write this, it is the forty-second day of the lockdown declared by the South African President. However, even as things slowly reopen, difficulties for refugees and other migrants can still be felt. During these times, migrants are most affected for three reasons: 1) migrants depend on movement domestically and internationally, and face difficulty accessing jobs, homes, and resources with restrictions on travel; 2) government relief assistance is mostly targeted toward South African citizens, not migrants; and 3) most refugees and migrants depend on informal livelihoods, which have a harder time resuming usual operations than formal businesses do. However, informal grassroots organizations have emerged to support migrants through these difficult times.

*Cover photo: Recipients of the relief aid organized by a Zimbabwean social network in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Photo by P. Dzosora.*

## Movement Restrictions

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Even as some businesses reopen, the borders remain closed to the public. This means that the migrants—many of whose savings are now almost depleted—cannot return to their countries of origin. Air transport is allowed only for repatriation of foreign nationals and locals who were stranded globally. The borders were also opened for the transportation of goods and services including for funerals, which are an important part of African culture in which the dead are buried in countries of origin. Movement within South Africa's provinces was only permitted for seven days, whereby people who were trapped during the Level 5 lockdown were allowed to move to places of residence or workplaces. However, these regulations are being changed constantly, including a recent resumption of long-distance *kombi* minibuses, which are now allowed to travel overnight to reach their destinations.

## Government Assistance and Informal Work

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Most foreigners are also at disproportionate risk because they do not qualify for government-led assistance being coordinated by the South African Department of Social Development. Many migrants are self-employed and sell goods on the streets to make a living, meaning they cannot earn income during the lockdown. They also face economic uncertainty as it remains to be seen how many weeks or months will go by before the Coronavirus's spread begins to decline. This unpredictability makes budgeting with limited resources even harder.

### Lockdown Levels in South Africa

For two weeks, we have been at a Level 4 lockdown, a step down from the highest Level 5 that saw everything in MMM come to a standstill. During the Level 4 lockdown, a curfew has been imposed from 9:00 pm to 5:00 am every day. Public transport is permitted, but with limited carrying capacity and specific safety and hygiene protocols, including all passengers being required to wear face masks for the duration of travel.

At Level 4, there has been a relaxation of lockdown regulations, and a few nonessential businesses have been allowed to reopen. In a Level 4 lockdown, we can go and buy winter clothing, hardware goods, and food from restaurants (but only as delivery service), and we can exercise within a 5 km (3 mi) radius of our residences. On May 1, some businesses were permitted to resume operations "in a phased manner:" they must first be decontaminated, sanitized, and re-organized in order to observe social distancing of the work force. To keep people far enough apart, many industries can only resume with a fraction of their workforce; for instance, mining activities are allowed to operate at below 50% of their full workforce.

## Local Support

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Initially, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and informal social networks stepped up to organize deliveries of parcels to migrants who needed food and other support. Among numerous networks of migrants, two Zimbabweans and I have worked to coordinate between several NGOs to provide food handouts to foreigners. I had the privilege of being one of the women who could offer their vehicles to collect food and deliver it to the needy members of our community.

Bloemfontein's migrants depended on strong social networks, solidarity, and support to small, informal businesses even before the Coronavirus pandemic (see my report [here](#)). The amount of local support for refugees and migrants during this crisis is an

### Food Parcels



Some of the food parcels. Photo by author.

### Deliveries for Migrant Families



Alice (in pink) and a colleague named Gety, together with a church employee, helping to pack food parcels in a car for delivery. Photo courtesy of Neill from my church.

indication of the strength of informal networks in these populations. However, this relief is just a short-term cushion for families, and the crisis continues to drag on. Today, seven weeks into the lockdown, foreigners whose livelihoods have been affected are saying that they are running out of food and other basic services.

### Office at Home

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As for myself, the last time I went to the office was on March 25. We had to abide by the President's declaration of a state of emergency following the recommendation of the World Health Organization (WHO). The university where I work had already started making plans for students and staff just before lockdown and had begun requiring all employees to work from home. It was a challenge in the beginning because the set-up was unusual and took a lot of adjusting. I had to set up my workstation at my place of residence, and I have two children who are also studying at university.

We were fortunate that the university offered me and one of my children access to a virtual private network (VPN) to be able to work and study. Work continues, but remotely: I have students who I am supervising who are doing research, and we have virtual meetings, WhatsApp calls, and chats from time to time. Often, we have to meet virtually on the weekends because the Internet connection is better than during the week. For my other child, I have to purchase enough data for her so she can continue conducting research for her master's degree. Fortunately, the government already had negotiated cheaper data from a number of local networks.

I have learnt to adjust and adapt. My weekday begins at 7:00 am when I exercise with the children. We were housebound during the Level 5 lockdown and learned to exercise indoors. Now in the Level 4 lockdown, we are allowed to jog and walk within a 5 km radius of our residence. I have found my normal office hours take longer being remote and often drag on past 5:00 pm.

We have virtual office meetings with my colleagues, and we constantly keep in touch through social media. The university has been supportive, especially regarding the anxiety and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. There is constant communication from upper management providing accurate information on the progress of the Coronavirus situation. They are offering staff counselling services remotely, and there are toll free numbers that we can call if we need help. Our human resources department at the university gives us briefs at least every week, sometimes more often when there is a need. The trade unions are also in constant contact with upper management and human resources offices to protect our interests. They have conversations about compliance with regulations, suitable work arrangements, measures to ensure the safety of our staff members, and minimizing exposure. I feel that as a university employee, my mental and psychosocial needs are well taken care of.

## Migrant Volunteers



Members of the migrant community in Bloemfontein packaging relief aid for distribution to affected community members who cannot benefit from government support. Photo by P. Dzosora.